



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

AFGHANISTAN

Gender

Fall 2008



PHOTO: USAID/AFGHANISTAN

Since 2002, USAID has trained nearly 500 female journalists, strengthening the independent media network across the country (top). In 2008, 400 women attended the First National Women's Council meeting in Kabul (bottom).



PHOTO: USAID/AFGHANISTAN

GENDER SNAPSHOT

- More than 8,000 women participated in "Learning for Life" classes to acquire literacy, numeracy, and good health and hygiene practices.
- Over 70,000 loans have been extended to women-owned businesses.
- The Afghan Midwives Association (AMA) now boasts a growing membership of 1,100 women.

OVERVIEW

Long-excluded from education, health care, employment, and participation in public life, Afghan women continue to suffer from illiteracy, poor health, and extreme poverty. The country's maternal mortality and female illiteracy rates are among the highest in the world, while women's life expectancy, at just 44 years, is among the lowest. Not only do Afghan women face urgent humanitarian needs, but their untapped energy and productivity are essential for sustainable peace, security, and development in Afghanistan.

The United States is committed to helping remove constraints on women's potential, as championed by First Lady Laura Bush. Women's participation in reconstruction will have transformational impacts on Afghanistan. To achieve this, USAID supports legal rights for women, helps them gain access to public services and jobs, builds their capacity, and encourages their inclusion in public life. USAID programs aim to ensure a better future for Afghanistan's women, their families, communities, and country.

PROGRAMS

To remedy past discrimination and advance gender equality USAID programs include components that directly benefit women and girls. These provide education and vocational training, increase their participation in civil society, help achieve and enforce legal rights, create employment opportunities, and increase women's overall well-being. USAID implements gender- and women-specific programs throughout Afghanistan.

INCREASING ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

Afghan women suffer from extremely high rates of maternal mortality, malnutrition, anemia, tetanus, post-war trauma, and clinical depression. The country also has one of the world's highest rates of tuberculosis, and women constitute approximately 70% of sufferers. Following the dissolution of the Taliban government, the vast majority of women had little or no access to quality health care. Even today, an Afghan woman dies every 30 minutes from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth.

To address these urgent problems, USAID programs bring basic health and essential hospital services to women in 13 provinces. These programs provide maternal health care and immunizations; treat malnutrition, communicable diseases, mental health problems, and disabilities; and provide essential medications. Between 2002 and 2008, access to health and hospital services has increased from eight percent to approximately 80 percent. Support for recently established midwife and OB/GYN associations, a key element of USAID's health work, greatly helps curb maternal mortality. In addition, because it is considered unsuitable for male doctors to treat women in Afghanistan, all activities aim to increase access to female health workers and promote women's entry into medical fields.



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Gender (continued)



PHOTO: USAID/AFGHANISTAN

Girls now account for 35 percent of the six million students enrolled in school. Girls were barred from formal education during the Taliban.



PHOTO: USAID/AFGHANISTAN

Women employed in processing edible pine nuts. From home-based businesses to entrepreneurial start-ups, women's role in the economic growth of Afghanistan has increased exponentially since 2002.

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INCREASING LITERACY AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Under the Taliban, girls were not allowed to attend school. As a result, approximately 90 percent of Afghan women are illiterate. Girls still face formidable obstacles to education, including restricted mobility and access to schools, severe shortages of female teachers, social resistance in some parts of the country, and early marriage. To increase the participation of Afghan girls in school, USAID provides training and technical support to teachers and educational policymakers, and USAID's community-based activities provide nearly 190,000 girls and women with literacy, numeracy, and life skills training. USAID also funds the printing and distribution of textbooks to girls, the construction of girls' schools, and has built a women's dormitory at Kabul University that enables over 1,000 young women from outside of Kabul to attend university.

DEVELOPING ECONOMIC GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

Decades of war left Afghanistan's estimated 50,000 widows to cope in an environment with few resources, public services, and ways to earn a living. In response, USAID supports programs designed to lift women out of difficult circumstances and promote broader economic growth, providing credit and business training that helps women participate in the market economy. By the summer of 2008, one rural enterprise program had issued 70,000 loans to women, for a total of over \$13 million. USAID creates income generating opportunities for women who must work from home and provides marketing services for their products. Female entrepreneurs also receive assistance to pursue commercial opportunities in fields ranging from horticulture, veterinary science, and food processing to dairy production.

SUPPORTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Women have long been restricted from public life in Afghanistan. Although Afghanistan's constitution stipulates that the legal status of women is equal to men, violations of women's rights are common and widespread. Access to justice is hampered by women's limited awareness of their rights and the limited reach of the formal justice system outside of urban centers. To promote change, USAID provides women's rights awareness training for female law students and judges, sponsors roundtables to promote public debate and dialogue on women's rights in Islam, helps build the capacity of civil society to influence public policy and to reform advocacy efforts, supports voter registration outreach to women, assists women candidates, and promotes gender equality in political parties.

USAID has trained 70 female judges and given them the tools necessary to officiate over the courts, manage cases, and ensure due process. Additionally, USAID has provided professional media training for nearly 500 female journalists, strengthening the independent media network across the country. Women make up twenty-six percent of the Upper and Lower Houses of parliament and Bamyan Province is governed by Afghanistan's first female governor.